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SUBJECT: EGYPT MEDIA TRENDS: AUGUST 18-21, 2006

¶1. Summary. Reactions to Syrian president Bashar Al-Assad's August 17 speech has figured prominently in Egyptian news and commentaries, with the majority of monitored columns devoted to the subject since August 18. Commentaries and editorials have been largely disapproving of his "insults" toward Arab leaders and his perceived posturing of "victory" in Lebanon. Weekend television news highlighted President Mubarak's critical remarks in reaction to Al-Assad's statements, most notably President Mubarak's caution against "interference in Lebanese internal affairs," and "cheap one-upmanship". Today's headlines quoted the Syrian information minister refuting claims of insulting Egypt, with a focus on President Mubarak's comments over the weekend. In breaking news of the day, two trains collided in northern Egypt. End summary.

¶2. Today's headlines and lead stories. Today's television coverage focused largely on the fatal morning train collision in northern Egypt. News of the death toll continued throughout the day and government officials, such as Prime Minister Nazif, traveled to the scene. Many of the day's headlines continued the weekend focus on reactions to Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad's speech of August 17. Government-controlled dailies, such as Al-Ahram, Al-Akhbar and Al-Gomhouriya carried headlines from Damascus, such as, "Syrian Information Minister Says Bashar's Words Were Not Directed at Mubarak or Egypt", "Damascus Says it Does Not Deserve Egyptian Media Attack", "Cairo-Damascus Ties Strategic, Brotherly", and "Insulting Egypt Absolutely Impossible."

¶3. Weekend headlines and lead stories. Weekend news coverage provided airtime and bylines to President Mubarak's reactions to President Al-Assad's comments. Government-controlled weekly paper, Al-Akhbar Al-Yom, carried an exclusive interview with Egyptian President Mubarak on Saturday, August 19 in which he said, "the current stage does not tolerate any type of cheap one-upmanship" and warned against "any attempt to interfere with internal Lebanese affairs." He called Hizballah "part of the Lebanese fabric," cautioned against "any actions that threaten the unity of Lebanon," and commented on Iran, calling it "an important country in the region," recommending that "the conflict between the US and Iran be solved diplomatically through direct dialogue, as a strike on Iran would mean the end of stability in the region and world." Evening news programs on August 19 repeated Mubarak's statements about interference in Lebanon and "cheap one-upmanship" but did not focus on his comments about Iran.

¶4. In the commentaries and editorials. Since the August 17 speech, many columnists expressed strongly negative sentiments against President Al-Assad's attacks on other Arab leaders, and his alleged claims of victory in the recent war between Hizballah and Israel. The substance and tenor of the commentaries were largely represented in editorials by the influential editors-in-chief of well-known dailies. Osama Saraya, chief editor of leading pro-government daily, Al-Ahram, took issue with Syria's "celebrating a victory that is not theirs" (August 18). Editor-in-chief of independent daily, Nahdet Misr, criticized Al-Assad's failure to "take any action during the Lebanon war or during the past thirty-three years since

the occupation of the Golan Heights," and "undermining Lebanese unity and scheming to return to Lebanon through Hezbollah" (August 19). Similary, Momtaz Al-Qot, editor-in-chief of large circulation, government-controlled daily, Al-Akhbar, criticized Al-Assad for "keeping his mouth shut throughout the Lebanon war and doing nothing to support Lebanon" and for "impolite accusations against Arab and Lebanese leaders" (August 19). His editorial, entitled, "The Cub", went on to accuse Al-Assad of "bringing about 'creative chaos' in the Arab world, and stoking sectarian strife in Lebanon... just like his comrade, Ahmadinejad."

¶5. Public sentiment. According to a recent poll in popular Egyptian web portal, masrawy.com, when asked their opinion on "the next target in the greater Middle East project," 65 percent (1100) voted that Syria would be next, while 30 percent (501) voted for Iran. Total number of voters was 1,692. As reported by Reuters on Sunday, according to preliminary figures from a separate poll conducted by the Ibn Khaldoun Center for Development Studies run by Saad Eddin Ibrahim, Hassan Narallah was voted the most popular figure in the Middle East, followed by Hamas leader, Khaled Meshaal and Iranian president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Voters totaled 1,200 from 15 separate governorates in Egypt. RICCIARDONE